

February 16, 2012 | by [Felice D. Gaer](#) and [Richard D. Land](#)

The following article appeared in the Des Moines Register yesterday. For a link to the original article, go to

<http://www.desmoinesregister.com/article/20120216/OPINION01/302160023/Guest-columnists-China-s-leaders-must-honor-religious-freedoms> .

Where is Gao Zhisheng?

When Vice President Xi Jinping, China's future president, visited the White House this week, President Obama should have pressed him to reveal the whereabouts of China's famed human rights and religious freedom attorney and other dissidents who have disappeared while in Chinese custody.

Gao vanished three years ago this month. His “crime” was defending Falun Gong practitioners and arrested Christians, while peacefully promoting democracy. Gao suffered horrendous torture which his captors reportedly videotaped and showed to other detained dissidents. Due to protests from abroad, China allowed Gao to resurface in April 2010, but he has not been heard from since.

Gao’s story is not unusual. China has a troubled human rights record which has worsened over the past year. Haunted by the fate of its counterparts in Eastern Europe and Russia, China’s Communist Party allegedly fears that peaceful advocates for fundamental rights, especially religious freedom, will weaken Beijing’s control. China has forcibly “disappeared” advocates like Gao, and it jailed its Nobel Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo and vilified the Dalai Lama as a terrorist.

Religious freedom advocates are no strangers to Chinese prisons. Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, Falun Gong, and many Catholics and Protestants face prison terms and other sanctions, including destruction of property, torture and control over key doctrines and selecting leaders. China deems them a threat because it doesn’t control their conscience.

This reality is a continued roadblock in U.S.-China relations and for religious freedom advocacy. The visit of China’s future president offers a chance to remove this barrier. During Xi Jinping’s stops in Washington, Iowa and Los Angeles, Americans should call for the release of Gao Zhisheng and others who languish in prison or have been “disappeared” for their religious beliefs.

Among the others who have “disappeared” are Bishops Su Zhimin and Shi Enxiang, leaders of the underground Catholic Church. Both had spent decades in prison for their faith and later vanished, without notice or trial, more than a decade ago.

Another example is Gendun Choekyi Nyima, who had been designated in 1995 as the 11th Panchen Lama of Tibetan Buddhism. Since the Dalai Lama had chosen him, China “disappeared” the 6-year-old boy and installed another as the Panchen Lama. Gendun Choekyi Nyima is now 22 and authorities still won’t reveal where he is.

Gao Zhisheng, Bishops Su Zhimin and Shi Enxiang, and Gendun Choekyi Nyima are but four individuals forcibly “disappeared” due to their religious activity or religious freedom advocacy. They are a compelling representation in the panoply of China’s human rights abuses.

In 2008, the United Nations Committee against Torture called on China to “adopt all necessary measures to prohibit and prevent enforced disappearances, to shed light on the fate of missing persons, including Gendun Choekyi Nyima, and prosecute and punish perpetrators, as this practice constitutes per se, a violation of the Convention [against Torture],” which China has ratified.

Chinese leaders claim they arrest dissidents to keep China stable and secure. But especially in a vast and diverse nation like China, it is impossible to create lasting stability by trampling on freedom of thought, religion and conscience. Only by honoring such freedoms can China build harmony from its diversity. By citing the “disappeared,” President Obama can stress that for China to reap the benefits of full engagement with the United States and the world community, it should give such individuals their unconditional rights to freedom.

Perhaps Xi Jinping can be persuaded to break from China’s past and let freedom flourish if he is shown how it is in China’s best interests. From President Obama on down, he must hear that no relationship with any country can be truly productive without a mutual respect for the rights of humanity, including the bedrock right to freedom of religion or belief.

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